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SUBJECT: Mission Participates in Diversity Panel on Race and Inclusion

¶1. Summary: Congen Management Officer (and published author) gave a U.S. perspective on diversity as an invited member of a panel on the subject at Sao Paulo's Biannual Book Festival on August 20. The

event featured many of the most important members of Brazil's diversity community. Panel discussions revealed how participants see diversity/social inclusion issues developing in Brazil, showed the experts' frequent tendency to relate Brazil's experience to that of the United States, and showcased the potential for Mission Brazil to help meet the programming needs of the U.S.-Brazil Action Plan to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Discrimination and Promote Equality. Overall, the event demonstrated how the U.S. can play a constructive and even essential role in Brazil's discussions about its own diversity challenges. End Summary.

¶2. Congen Management Officer took part in a panel on diversity at Sao Paulo's Biannual Book Festival on August 20. The book festival has a 40 year history and is a major event, attended by thousands of people. All of Brazil's publishers and a number of foreign entities have extensive display areas. The diversity panel featured

important members of Sao Paulo's and Brazil's diversity/human rights community. The Management Officer appeared with the following: Andre Fischer, a magazine and website publisher and Gay, Lesbian and Transsexual rights activist; Myriam Chinall, a psychologist and educator; Cida Bento, coordinator of the NGO Center for the Study of Inequality; Sister Coen, a peace activist and member of Brazil's Zen Buddhist community; Zulu Araujo, President of the Palmares Cultural Foundation (named for a famous 19th century social rebellion in which Afro-Brazilians played a critical role); and Zeze Motta, a famous Afro-Brazilian actress and now Superintendant for Racial Equality for Rio de Janeiro.

An Energetic Discussion...

¶3. The panel discussion centered on the work that Brazil still needs to do to achieve a greater levels of social justice through increasing the social consciousness of diversity. While Brazil prides itself on diversity, a number of the panelists cited ongoing patterns of racism that persist in the society. Fischer noted how gays, lesbians and transsexuals still face discrimination. Zulu Araujo cited the example of young, Afro-Brazilian mothers in predominantly black Bahia who, when they give birth to a baby lighter skinned than themselves, are said by locals to have a "clean belly." And Zeze Motta recounted how, in her early days as an actress, those casting productions would complain about her African features, including "a flat nose and curly hair," to the point where the actress considered cosmetic surgery. Motta acknowledged that the "Black is Beautiful" movement in the U.S. during the 1960s helped to awaken her to her inherent beauty of her natural features.

...And Frequent Comparison to the U.S.

¶4. Brazilians, in focusing on their own diversity challenges, made frequent references and comparisons to the U.S. In general, they see the U.S., not as a model to be copied, but as a source of

positive and instructive examples, as a sister society still struggling with the same issues.

The Author's Story

¶15. Management officer Watlington is the author of a children's book on diversity entitled "Zoe" ( [www.amazon.com/Zoe-Calvin-Watlington/dp/0972428402](http://www.amazon.com/Zoe-Calvin-Watlington/dp/0972428402) ).

¶16. "Zoe" tells a positive story of diversity celebration led by the children in the story. Just as interesting to the audience was the officer's own account of how he came to write a children's book. The author recounted how he had originally sat down to write an essay about diversity, but ultimately came to the conclusion that the challenge was "not so much adult/intellectual as generational." From there, he decided to write a children's book, an undertaking that required months of research, including spending many hours talking to little children about differences.

Telling Our Story, "Warts 'n All"

¶17. Panelists' frequent references to the U.S. created a natural opening for Management Officer to provide a realistic recounting of both U.S. achievements in the diversity area and a straightforward account of the United States' continuing challenges in this area.

Reaction of both fellow panelists and the audience was positive.

¶18. The Brazilian activists' tendency to use the U.S. as a point of reference was quite striking. While many saw much that was positive and instructive in the U.S. experience, there was also a tendency on the part of some in the panel to occasionally both overshoot or undershoot the mark, either overestimating the degree to which the U.S. has resolved diversity issues or underestimating U.S. achievements in this area. Given the Brazilians' tendency to cite the U.S. example, it was important to have an American there to share the stage in a positive way, and offer a U.S. perspective on this critical issue.

¶19. Post's participation in the panel shows that Mission-developed programming can complement Washington resources in realizing our Action Plan with Brazil on eliminating racism and promoting equality. Brazilians' energy and willingness to address diversity issues offers us a unique opportunity to enter into a positive partnership, sharing hard lessons learned in two of the hemisphere's biggest and most diverse societies.

¶10. This cable was coordinated/cleared by Embassy Brasilia.

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